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Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's remarks at the first plenary meeting of the International Conference Global Threats to Biological Security: Problems and Solutions, Sochi, June 22, 2023

Esteemed conferees,

I am gratified to see such a representative group of experts on biological security from the CSTO, the CIS, BRICS and the SCO countries, and from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Your participation in the regular, fourth International Conference on Biological Security in Sochi, organised by Rospotrebnadzor with support from the Foreign Ministry is graphic confirmation of the invariable importance and status of this event in the context of countering biological risks and threats and enhancing international and regional security.

Traditionally, the issues of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) have been a fundamental element of the Sochi conference. The convention was the first international document to outlaw an entire category of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This was a tangible step forward in promoting universal and full disarmament, which reduced the threat of using biological agents for military purposes. As the BTWC's depository, the Russian Federation consistently fulfills all of its provisions.

However, unfortunately, even after half a century of the convention, we cannot say that the problem of biological weapons has been fully removed from the international agenda. For a long time, the Russian

Federation has expressed grievances and serious concerns over the military biological activities conducted with direct assistance and participation of the Pentagon in laboratories outside US territory, including in former Soviet republics – far from North America but close to Russian borders. Most often, these activities are conducted by proxy – via the Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency and private companies that are US Defence Department contractors.

The participating states drafted BTWC confidence-building measures “in order to prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts and suspicions.” US reports presented annually in the context of these measures, do not contain any information on Washington's programmes or projects outside US national territory or their funding. We have asked our American colleagues to provide exhaustive explanations on such activity but they have never given us a proper response. This secrecy and lack of response only confirm that Russia's grievances are well grounded.

The facts of BTWC violations by the US and Ukraine in Ukrainian territory, which were discovered during the special military operation are a flagrant example of this activity. These facts make it clear that under the excuse of biological activity for “preventive or other peaceful purposes,” the Americans are carrying out projects aimed at developing components of biological weapons outside their national territory. To review well-grounded questions as regards the observance of BTWC commitments by the US and Ukraine, Russia initiated a consultative conference on BTWC Article V (Geneva, September 5-9, 2022) and a UN Security Council session to review Russia's complaint and proposal to hold an international inquiry under the Council's aegis on BTWC Article VI (October 27 and November 2, 2022). During these events and the Ninth BTWC Review Conference (Geneva, November 28 - December 16, 2022), Russian representatives provided the necessary explanations and presented a huge amount of available materials. However, our well justified questions for the US and Ukraine, supported by like-minded countries, failed to result in a satisfying answer. Our questions remain pending and need to be addressed.

We will continue insisting on a substantive discussion of the Ukraine issue in the framework of the BTWC with a view to settling it and removing this serious irritant from the convention's agenda. Since the discussion of this issue at the Ninth BTWC Review Conference, we have accumulated additional materials that were presented by Lieutenant-General Igor Kirillov, Head of the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, at his briefings and in the report by the parliamentary commission on investigation into the circumstances related to the creation of biological laboratories by US specialists in Ukraine.

These problems were not born out of thin air. It is difficult to control all the actions undertaken by foreign military agencies. Since the convention does not have a verification mechanism, it is impossible to compel the states parties to share information on military-biological activities. In this context, a proper verification at the national level is required as well as a concerted effort by the international community to strengthen the BTWC protocol.

Along with the overwhelming majority of states parties, Russia is convinced that the convention would become much more effective if the states parties adopted a universal, legally binding and undiscriminating protocol regarding all articles of the convention with an efficient verification mechanism.

However, the United States has been blocking the development of an instrument that can ensure reliable compliance with the BTWC since 2001. To justify its position, the US claims that the convention is unverifiable and that work on a proposed verification instrument is unnecessary. However, these assertions completely contradict the conclusions by the Ad Hoc Group of Governmental Experts to Identify and Examine Potential Verification Measures. They concluded in 1993, that verification measures might be useful in ensuring confidence in states parties observing their commitments under the BTWC.

At the same time, the United States persistently tries to gain unilateral access to microbiological facilities run by other countries. In other

words, Washington does not reject the “added value” of inspections, but would like to use them exclusively for its own purposes, without a BTWC link and strictly on a voluntary, unintrusive basis. It is important to understand what would prevent our American colleagues from developing a protocol-based verification system for compliance with the BTWC if they are not engaged in any activity that violates the convention. After all, the Americans consider an effective verification mechanism to be a key element of any arms control and disarmament agreement.

Russia urges all interested parties to pool efforts to develop an enhanced international security process to ensure arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

We hope that the non-aligned movement countries will become involved in the activities of the Working Group on the Strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention, which was established by the BTWC Ninth Review Conference. The first session will take place in August of this year. The Russian Federation is promoting initiatives aimed at the real strengthening and institutionalising of the convention’s influence. They include:

- the creation of mobile medico-biological units;
- the institution of a scientific consultative committee;
- the creation of a mechanism to investigate alleged violations of BTWC commitments;
- upgrading BTWC confidence measures – the states parties need to provide information on their military-biological activity outside their national territory.

The Russian Federation is convinced that the international community needs to step up its effort to strengthen the expert and technical potential of the UN Secretary-General’s Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM). Special attention should be paid to the UNSGM’s Guidelines and Procedures.

With the exception of the technical appendices that were adjusted by points in 2007, they have not been updated since they were adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution 45/57C of December 4, 1990. Developed over 30 years ago, they do not match today's reality on chemical and biological security. New challenges and threats have come to light (including the risk of chemical and biological terrorism), as well as many technical and methodological innovations that could make the UNSGM more effective.

In this context, we would like to report that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov recently sent a message to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres with an appeal to organise a review of the UNSGM's guidelines and procedures with a view to updating them. We set forth in detail our vision on the main areas of this update and hope for support for our position. We believe the interested UN member states should send a signal to this effect to the UN Secretary-General.

In our work we should also consider the threat of terrorists using biological agents as a weapon, especially since it is possible to cover up this use as a natural outbreak of infectious diseases among people, animals or plants. In this connection, we proposed an initiative at the Geneva Conference on Disarmament in 2016 to draft an international convention for suppression of chemical and biological terrorism. This convention is designed (in addition to the already existing international tools) to eliminate gaps in countering WMD terrorism. It should also help unblock negotiations at one of the UN's main disarmament forums – the Conference on Disarmament. We hope all stakeholders will join this substantive effort on the proposed convention under a balanced programme of the Conference on Disarmament.

Esteemed colleagues,

We are convinced that it is only possible to resolve biological security issues and develop mutually beneficial and equitable cooperation in this area through a concerted effort. We intend to make a constructive contribution to the discussion of these issues in multilateral formats

(in the framework of the BTWC, the CSTO, the CIS, the SCO and BRICS)
and on a bilateral basis.

Thank you for your attention.